Intersectional Social Work Perspectives on the Systemic Killing of Black Men

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Abstract

Three doctoral students in social work with differing positionalities came together to condemn the systemic killing of Black men. This condemnation is codified through reflexive narratives of their experiences. These authors align their narratives with the National Association of Social Workers code of ethics (2008) and with an intersectional perspective. These social workers reflect on how they became conscious of the systemic killing of Black men and call for social workers and the social work profession to work towards a more robust set of protections for Black lives.

Keywords: African Americans, homicide, justice, narrative, racism

As outlined by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) social and political action ethical standard, social workers should act to eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, ability, color, and gender (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Consequently, the problem of fatal encounters with police and non-indictment charges of killers of Black men within the United States should be a prime area of concern for the profession of social work. In fact, NASW released two statements that illustrate a desperate need for law enforcement reforms that include creation of standards related to excessive police force for persons with mental illnesses and people of color, body cameras, and police officer trainings to address the devastations of police violence (National Association of Social Workers, 2014; Wilson, 2014 August 18).

As a profession committed to social justice, and the dignity and worth of all people, active engagement and solidarity to ending the systematic killings of Black men without justice is needed in social work teaching, research, and advocacy (Bent-Goodley, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this collaborative reflective narrative is to engage solidarity work among social work advocates who are committed to ending systemic and institutionalized racism that impede on the well-being of Black men and boys. To do this, we present this narrative from three distinct positions. Our hope in undertaking this project is to provide our diverse social work perspectives on the recent killings of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown. We draw attention to these names because of the international attention these particular cases have drawn in terms of human rights violations (Mejia, 2014 December 6). We highlight the recent violent deaths of these Black men with the recognition that Black male adolescents die by homicide at 15 times the rate of White males (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Minino, 2010), these homicides do not represent a new phenomenon in the U.S. (Alexander, 2012; Jones, 1997/1972). To be clear, Black men have been systemically and continuously killed since the inception of the slave trade (Douglas & Garrison, 1846; Jones, 1997/1972). We present our narrative as a call for a day without a single homicide perpetrated against a Black man.

We center this collective narrative using an intersectional perspective (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Our voices—a Black woman, a Black man, and a White man (all social workers)—represent varying perspectives on the intersections of race, gender, class, and

sexuality. As a diverse social work collective, our unique positionalities shed light on our lived experiences as a source for political and social action. We are aware of our privilege and our oppression. The intersectional praxis we call for in schools of social work is both self-reflective and collaborative. Embedded in this work, is acknowledging one's position—socially and politically — in order to bridge across differences to move towards a collective front. In doing this, social workers from diverse backgrounds can form an inclusive effort to ending the structural, political, and representational injustices experienced by African Americans in Western societies (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991).

A Black Woman's Social Work Perspective

It was fall of 2010 and I had just begun my first social work internship as a bachelors' student. I entered my new position with a probation department in the state of California with an enthusiastic and naïve passion for forensic social work. As I stepped out of my car with feelings of nervousness and excitement, a probation officer stepped in front of me to block me from a situation occurring in the parking lot. As I looked past his physical barrier, I saw a police officer body slam an African American youth on to the concrete parking lot, then hog tie him and place him into his police car, belly down. When I asked, "why is he being taken away?" the probation officer responded, "he was being violent towards staff".

Although I was not able to witness the escalation of events that led up to the situation, I remember feeling two contradicting emotions. First and foremost, I felt a sense of anger about the use of violence, and the unhealthy relationship between African Americans and law enforcement; a relationship that extends beyond this single incident but can be traced throughout U.S. history (Alexander, 2012; Jones, 1997/1972). Second, I felt emotionally desensitized and numb by the actions of the police officer. I began to think, "This type of thing happens every day. This youth must have done something wrong that called for such a harsh response." However, after reflecting over the experience of my family members, including myself, who have been racially profiled or aggressively approached by law enforcement out of suspicion of wrong doing, I realized the devastating impact negative police responses can have on the well-being of African Americans that can ultimately end their lives prematurely.

I can recall a time when a good friend of mine was excited because it was her little brother's 14th birthday. She exclaimed, "I can't believe my little brother is 14 years old! He is growing up so fast". As I sat in her car, in route to pick up her little brother, I listened to her reminisce and share stories about her brother. As we reached our destination, her brother and his friend entered the car and we drove off. My friend asked her brother, "James are you excited about your birthday?" He responded, "Yeah. I can't wait to purchase some new shoes." A conversation followed about her brother's safety; one that I have heard often, and I have personally had similar conversations with males in my own family. "James, I need you to listen to me. Do not look, stare, or talk to anyone while at the mall, make sure your cellphone is fully charged, and do not be talkin' smart, or talkin' back to any police officers, you hear me? You need to be careful because someone can look at you and think you are a grown man, and I don't want to go home and find out that you've been shot or arrested because you are Black and a man." With a few "yes" responses and "that's right" interjections, I agreed with the words spoken by my friend.

In reflecting over this experience in juxtaposition with the killings of African American youth as well as the broader issues of excessive police violence, it is unfortunate that these events have changed the way that African Americans view seeking help from police officers. I believe that we as African American women are fearful for the lives of our husbands, sons, brothers, and the many other male family members in our lives. We are fearful that our families will be torn apart and impacted emotionally due to the premature deaths of African American men. This harsh reality has lead us, as a community of African American women, to set aside time in order to teach our male loved ones how to interact or avoid law enforcement in order to protect their lives.

In light of my experiences, I believe the mistreatment of African American men goes beyond police brutality; It is a systemic issue that perpetuates our social and justice systems. African Americans who are actively involved in the *BlackLivesMatter* and other social movements, often face the critical, and probably most important questions: *How can we change the justice system? How can we protect the lives of men of color?* It is an important set of questions to ask, yet they are questions that do not have an answer. I believe that many African American women have relied on coaching Black men on what, and what not to do, as well as what, and what not to wear, while in public. I do not want this praxis to be misunderstood as respectability politics; in this sense, the intentions of African American women are not to police the bodies of African American men in efforts for more respectable and moral uplifting from the devastations of racial and gender oppression. Rather, this praxis is rooted in a politics of survival, one that includes women's use of their power-a-power that is embedded in wisdom and love—in efforts to save and preserve the lives of their male loved ones.

My praxis, however, is rooted in politics of social justice and social transformation. This politic is an anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-ablest, anti-heterosexist, and anti-classist social work praxis. My hope is that my work—through advocacy, teaching, and research—disrupts social systems that marginalize and oppress people of African descent. As such, my response to the aforementioned questions (e.g., How can we *change* the justice system? How can we *protect* the lives of men of color?) is that change and protection may occur through supporting self-defining practices that transform the myriad ways African Americans are (mis)defined, (mis)labeled, and (mis)read. Thus, my purpose is to further our understanding and support efforts that radically change our social and justice systems to save the lives of people of color.

A Black Man's Social Work Perspective

At the time of Travon Martin's death in 2012, I was a graduate student working towards the completion of my MSW. One of the most salient happenings I recall most often from that time was the disbelief I observed on the faces of many students within my graduate program. On many occasions, students expressed feelings of disbelief that societal aggression towards Black males, as we learned from the literature, was actually "real." I also recall a question that was proposed to me by one of my classmates who asked me: "What do you think about what happened with Travon Martin?" At that time, I was disinterested in discussing the topic. To me, the event was not a new phenomenon affecting my people, but instead was a historical problem that my people faced. Knowing this, I had rather focus my energy and attention on activities such as passing my exam than liberally providing my perceptive. By doing so, I was one step closer

toward graduation and making "real change"; I politely found a way to change the subject. Thinking back however, especially now after numerous other Black males have been killed and their deaths have made media attention post-Travon Martin, I wish that I had taken the time to give my narrative on the situation of violence against Black males to my classmate. I hope that this short piece provides an answer my former classmate's question.

During my childhood, I became aware of many injustices facing my community and how our experiences differed significantly from those of non-Black populations living in the United States. The first of which was learning about the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade involving my people and our enslavement. This historical trauma brought with it the separation of our families, rape of our women, forced religious conversions, and the acceptance of languages not indigenous to our African past. In addition to learning about my peoples' history during enslavement, I was also learned about the lynching practices of White Americans against Black males in the United States following our enslavement. In my family, topics such as these mentioned, were taught as our Maafa or African Holocaust. Similar to how Jewish families teach their children about their tragic past, I was also taught to never forget my own.

Despite knowing the tragic situation of my people in the United States, I have never as they say, walked around with a chip on my shoulder. Instead, my perspective as an adolescent coming of age was to not have high expectations from American society to honor my right to human dignity. Instead, it would be my responsibility to protect my rights, and "watch my back" at all times.

I can recall during my senior year of high school, a few weeks from graduation and just three months before going to Morehouse college to pursue a degree in psychology, myself along with two of my Black male friends were making our way back to the bus stop after dark. We had just finished leaving our neighborhood YMCA which served as the local hang out spot for youth who enjoyed playing sports. As we cut through a parking lot of a restaurant, a White man in a truck pulled up in front of us with his wife in the passenger seat. His wife pointed at me and declared, "That's him!" I was shocked! Who was I? Why did she believe she had seen or knew me? After her declaration, her partner began irately swearing directly at me as he began to motion out of his car. Not sure whether to run or stand still—in a state of shock—I began to prepare myself for the possibility of a physical altercation. At the same time, one of my friends gestured at the man, pulling at his waistband to indicate that he had a gun. The man shockingly said a few final words, got back in his truck, and drove off. I was relieved! If my friend had not pretended to have a gun, I am not sure how my night would have ended. Days later, my friends and I laughed about how I was mistaken for someone else and how my friend pretended to have a gun to get me out of the situation. The laughter response of my friends and I may seem strange to some who read my narrative, and some people may believe I must have experienced more than just laughter. However, the reality is that I did not have any other feelings; only laughter. For many Black youth living in urban communities chronically exposed to violence, as I was during my teen years, finding humor in your trauma is unfortunately often the only semi-healthy coping mechanism available. This is due to a lack of adequate community resources to address the issue. Consequently, being frightened of community violence is a privilege that I did not have in my youth, this is similar to many African American children today.

Since the beginning of my Social Work training in 2012, the birth of my sons, and other Black male children, keeps me grounded in the research and struggle for equality of Black lives. Research provides me with the means to make contributions towards positive change. Without research, I do not believe my calm demeanor that my friends often compliment me about would be apparent. In closing, and in response to a question that was once asked to me: how do I feel about the unnecessary and violent deaths of my community's Black males like Trayvon Martin, Eric Gardner, and others, I am not shocked. The reality that my people face in this country is not new. It is as old as the formation of the United States itself. As a result, I focus my anger into producing quality works that one day may help to make a meaningful difference. Malcolm X once said: "We declare our right on this earth...to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary (X, 1992, p. 56)." My means is social work research.

A White Man's Social Work Perspective

In order to reflect on my response to the police killings of multiple Black males between August and December of 2014, I must first explain that I am a White man. As a White man I have learned a variety of lessons about race that have shaped my perception of Black men. Most of the lessons I learned were insidious messages from movies and music that taught me that Black men are dangerous, intellectually inferior, and hypersexual. Although I have spent my life in the Western United States in cities with very few Black people, I found that most of my experiences with Black people—Black men in particular—were dramatically different than the messages I had received from mass media.

In 1995, I learned about a wrestling club in Portland, Oregon that had a reputation for training some of the area's best wrestlers. I remember the first time I walked into Peninsula Park Wrestling Club. I had never seen a Black wrestling coach but there in front of me were three Black male coaches. I went up to the office to inquire about fees for participation where Mr. Pittman explained the nominal fees but then turned to me and said "Don't worry about paying today, get out on the mat. If you value what we do here, you are welcome to join us." In the years that followed, I wrestled at that club several hours a week until I graduated from high school. Despite my regular attendance at the club, none of the coaches ever checked to confirm that I had paid for a membership.

After practice, Mr. Pittman would gather us around and ask us questions. On one occasion after I had beaten a wrestler with a high national ranking. Mr. Pittman asked me "How did you win last night?" I responded, "He is from Battle Ground and I am from Evergreen, I wanted my team to win." Mr. Pittman was disgusted with my answer and said "This is how gangs work, he is your brother! We have to do better than this. You won because you have been working hard and you were focused during the match." This small group of Black men taught me more about life than they taught me about wrestling.

As I finished up my undergraduate degree in sociology in 2003, I took a Diverse Clients course in social work from the only instructor of color I was aware of at my undergraduate institution. The instructor— Moises —required our class to watch the *Eyes on the Prize* series

outside of class. This series prompted me to go to the school library and watch every available film on Malcom X. Through the instruction I received at Moises' feet, I realized I had adopted a set of problematic stereotypes toward Black men that were at odds with the meaningful real life experiences with Black men. I recognized that it was my responsibility to deconstruct the stereotypes that had been fostered for me primarily through advertisements, mass media portrayals, and dehumanizing jokes.

The killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in particular have haunted me in recent months. As I learned that the White officers who killed these two men would not be indicted, I became sick to my stomach. This nausea comes in waves and has persisted for several months. I cannot change the fact that I have ancestors who belonged to the Ku Klux Klan. I cannot change the fact that my White skin inoculates me against institutional racism. I can choose to resist the messages that teach me that Black men are dangerous, oversexed, and intellectually inferior. I can begin to construct a new narrative about the importance of Black male lives. The key reflection to the reader of my narrative is that my White skin allows me to ignore this paradox when my stomach gets too queasy for comfort. I am uncomfortable with the gross number of Black men who are dying violent deaths in this country, but because I am White, I can excuse myself from the table, and very few people will hold me accountable. I am trying to hold myself accountable enough to stay at the table.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to express our solidarity as social work doctoral students, with the *BlackLivesMatter* movement. This paper is designed as a call for social workers to work towards the elimination of systemic and institutionalized racism that ends the lives of Black men and boys. Our positionality has afforded us very different experiences as we have navigated race and gender in a society where these two constructs have meant the difference between life and death for so many. Between the ages of 15 and 24 the risk of homicide escalates for Black males, and in the year 2013 more than 4,000 Black men in this age range died by homicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Social workers must work to undo hundreds of years of messaging that has led us to fear these men. We present our narratives as a partial answer to Tatum's (2003/1997) call for a robust dialogue about race and gender. Our stories combine to condemn what Douglass (1846) called "irresponsible power." As social workers we call upon our profession to actively work to preserve the lives of Black men and boys. We call for a more robust set of protections for Black men's lives because *BlackLivesMatter*!

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